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SUBJECT: DEBTS AND LEADERSHIP WOES FORCE YABLOKO TO THINK
SMALLER

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Classified By: A/DCM Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Suffering from dwindling membership, fraying internal discipline, and onerous debt, the Yabloko liberal opposition party has failed to resurrect its national prospects since overhauling its leadership structures in June [1](#)2008. After failing to register in all nine October regional elections, Yabloko curtailed its electoral ambitions in March to contest only municipal races. While other opposition leaders, from Communists to Kasparov, have announced they will exploit the economic crisis for larger political gain, Yabloko instead has quietly focused on localized housing and social issues. Although party chairman Sergey Mitrokhin refers to Yabloko as "the last voice of democracy in Russia," Yabloko's diminished strength and unwillingness to cooperate with other opposition movements have lessened its already minimal influence. Yabloko no longer exists as national party and likely will continue to diminish in size, ambition, and relevance. End Summary.

Leaders Fail to Develop Platform or Maintain Discipline

[1](#)2. (C) Yabloko's leaders have failed not just to return the party to national relevance, but also to unite party members and maintain internal discipline. Sergey Mitrokhin replaced party founder Grigoriy Yavlinskiy as chairman in June 2008, accompanied by structural changes that instituted a more "horizontal" structure to contrast with United Russia's vertical (Ref A). However, the flattened structure -- led by a 12-member national Political Committee -- has failed to produce a coherent political platform or strategy. Instead, the quarterly Political Committee meetings have churned out patchwork position papers on a wide variety of issues, without a uniting theme and based on the interests of individual members. In February, for example, the Committee released papers on the need for massive investment housing construction and on combating latent Stalism in Russia.

[1](#)3. (C) Although Mitrokhin nominally runs Yabloko, the party's leadership structure remains unclear. Mitrokhin's ascension to the party's helm resulted from a compromise intended to deny the chairmanship to Maksim Reznik, who leads the party's St. Petersburg branch. However, Yabloko deputy chairman Sergey Ivanenko admitted to us April 10 that his party's leadership was not up to the task, adding that "Yabloko must find new leaders in order to survive, probably from the regions where we can find people who are not the same members" as usual. Mitrokhin, perhaps preoccupied more with Moscow City Duma seat than a national party strategy, rarely comments on major national or international issues. Tellingly, Yabloko first turns to its former head Yavlinskiy

to comment on international issues ranging from nuclear disarmament or the London G20 conference. Although Mitrokhin assumed day-to-day control of the party (and the largest office in Yabloko headquarters), Yavlinskiy remains the eminence grise on the Political Committee whenever credibility and name-recognition is needed.

¶4. (C) Yabloko leaders also have failed to maintain party discipline, as several members have defied party dictates by moonlighting for Garry Kasparov's new Solidarity movement. Yavlinskiy rebuffed Kasparov's Other Russia movement from its founding in 2003, and he derisively scorned Solidarity to us on March 4 as "stupidity." Mitrokhin echoed that opinion to us, predicting that Solidarity would fold before its first anniversary in December 2009. Other Yabloko leaders, discouraged by their moribund party's lack of initiative, apparently have disagreed. Maksim Reznik (re-elected April 20 to head Yabloko's St. Petersburg branch) and Ilya Yashin (former head of Yabloko Youth) both joined Solidarity's top leadership council in December, and two other Yabloko members joined its lower political council. Yabloko subsequently expelled Yashin from its Moscow branch for his "aggressive" work on behalf of Solidarity; Reznik was not suspended because (according to Yashin) he remains popular in the St. Petersburg branch and his expulsion may have led to a party schism. (Note: Mitrokhin and Ivanenko both told us they expect Yashin will be allowed to return to the party in November.) The April 26 Sochi mayoral election exposed further infighting, as the party's regional and Moscow leaders publicly disagreed on whether to support Solidarity's Boris Nemtsov in the race. The Krasnodar Region Yabloko head refused to support Nemtsov, while two members of the

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Political Committee support him. Ivanenko told us only that Yabloko is "ready to support" Nemtsov, while the expelled Yashin is running Nemtsov's campaign.

Lacking National Ambitions, Local Issues Take Precedence

¶5. (SBU) Yabloko hardly feigns the pretense any more of operating outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg, and even in those cities has limited its focus to localized populist issues. Housing conditions and scams have served as the basis for near-weekly Yabloko rallies throughout Moscow in March and April, although turnout has ranged only from 10-50 and media coverage has been minimal (Ref B). Rising inflation and utility costs have provided another rallying point, with Yabloko declaring April "the month to combat rising rates" of communal services, transport, electricity and heat, and gas. On April 11, Yabloko held a Moscow rally that attracted about 100 people to protest rising utility rates, and an April 21 rally protested gas prices and bonuses paid to gas monopoly executives. Mitrokhin also introduced a bill in the Moscow City Duma to cap inflation at 13 percent and increase the volume of subsidized electricity to residents.

¶6. (C) Recognizing Yabloko's exile in the political wilderness, Ivanenko told us that the party needed to re-brand itself to attract new members and re-define its role in Russia. Several times, Ivanenko described the Soviet-era Polish opposition group KOS-KOR (a forerunner of Polish Solidarity) as a template for Yabloko. Under this model, Yabloko would forgo elections to instead focus on recruiting the most politically active citizens, such intellectuals, journalists, and writers. These members in turn would rally public support for Yabloko that would eventually translate into electoral gains. Yavlinskiy told us in October that Yabloko's resurrection to national prominence could take as long as 30 years (Ref C), but Ivanenko predicted the process would take only half as long.

Depleted Membership Leads to Partnership With TIGR

17. (C) Without wide media access, Mitrokhin told us that Yabloko must rely on small newspapers and the internet to reach current and prospective members. New outreach efforts have included, for example, an online support system unveiled March 24 for Russians who believe they have been illegally fired, detained, or otherwise had their rights violated. However, recruitment remains difficult particularly in the regions, where support imploded after the 2003 State Duma elections shut Yabloko out of national politics. Volgograd and Bryansk party leaders told us, for example, that their branches have shrunk by 90 percent compared to five years ago, leaving just 200-300 members in each region. Ivanenko claimed to us April 10, however, that his party has begun to register new members at a rate of 100-150 per month because of discontent during the crisis. Yabloko's strongest recruitment reportedly has been in Yekaterinburg, Chechnya, and Ingushetiya, particularly among intelligentsia in those regions.

18. (C) Yabloko has adamantly refused over the years to partner with competing opposition movements, but it has shown a rare willingness to cooperate with the new TIGR movement. (Note: TIGR, which exists almost entirely as an online organization, first gained prominence in December for its large unauthorized rallies in Vladivostok protesting automobile import tariffs.) Opposition contacts have told us, and Ivanenko confirmed, that TIGR's Moscow branch is dominated by members of the xenophobic Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI). Yabloko-TIGR rallies in Moscow have focused on the tariff and housing issues described above, and an April 2 joint conference concluded with a declaration of their intention to work closely together in the future. When asked why Yabloko would ally with radical DPNI and TIGR elements but not with Solidarity, Ivanenko reasoned that "TIGR is aggressive, but they are not political." TIGR's success in registering to protest on the streets of Moscow likely made it a safe choice for Yabloko.

Debts Limit Yabloko to Municipal Elections

19. (C) Unable (by Mitrokhin's admission) to fund region-level campaigns, Yabloko's only electoral hopes remain at the municipal level. In March, Yabloko's few electoral wins came as single seats in city council races in Toliyatti, Yekaterinburg, and a few isolated cities. The party

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vigorously complained of electoral fraud in St. Petersburg city elections, but authorities denied the allegation. A personal concern of Mitrokhin will be retaining the party's two Moscow City Duma seats, although he told us he was unsure whether Yabloko would even field candidates in what he expects to be an unfair March 2010 election (Ref D). Ivanenko spoke far more optimistically, however, predicting improbably that Yabloko would take as many as five City Duma seats if the economic crisis worsens and voters perceive Yabloko as a change agent.

110. (C) Yabloko has maintained its party registration despite shouldering enormous party debts, the likes of which doomed the erstwhile Union of Right Forces (SPS) party to dissolution in November 2008. Russian electoral law stipulates that parties do not have to pay for their broadcast and print media campaign costs if they receive at least 3 percent of the vote in State Duma elections. Having fallen short in 2007, the Central Electoral Commission has claimed that Yabloko owes between USD 6-8 million. Mitrokhin called these debts "state racketeering" and insisted that Yabloko would never pay them. A draft bill has been proposed that would forgive party debts, either in whole or in part, but so far it has not received even a first reading in the State Duma.

Comment

¶11. (C) Yabloko's financial straits, focus on local constituent issues, and general absence in the regions confirm that it is no longer a national party. The uncharismatic Mitrokhin and the technocratic Ivanenko aspire only to keep the party on life support as a Moscow-St. Petersburg operation, and Ivanenko's admission that Yabloko needs new young leaders highlights a leadership fatigued after less than one year running the party. Yavlinskiy's gravitas can only carry Yabloko so far with his behind-the-scenes guidance and occasional public statements on major issues. With the party rudderless and in disarray, it is no surprise its leaders are threatened and its members enticed by upstarts like Solidarity. As these trends continue, Yabloko likely will continue to further diminish in size, ambition, and relevance.
BEYRLE